On-line campaigning in Russia: Evidence from the 2011 State Duma election

Sean P. Roberts

Researcher

The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

00160 Helsinki

Email: sean.robertsfiia.fi

Mobile: +358 50 5741064

Abstract

Despite the continuing growth of Internet use in Russia, there remains little systematic analysis of on-line election campaigning. This article presents an in-depth, multi-method analysis of party and candidate online activity during the 2011 State Duma election campaign – arguably Russia's first 'Internet election' – to ascertain the extent to which new social media is changing politics in Russia. The main findings indicate that the Internet did indeed help to level the competitive playing field during the election campaign period, but despite the growing number of Internet users, the overall level of on-line engagement remained weak.

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Introduction

The year on year rise in Internet use in Russia in the period 2008-2014 has led to a flurry of research on the possible implications of this medium in terms of political development and political behaviour (Moen-Larsen 2014; Oates 2013; Renz & Sullivan 2013). In particular, the wave of protests that followed the December 2011 State Duma election highlighted the important role of online social media in mobilising opposition forces (White & McAllister 2014), while the continuing growth of internet will likely ensure a prominent place for 'non-traditional media' in the forthcoming 2016 State Duma election. But, so far, the 2011 State Duma election – arguably Russia's first genuine internet election – has received little in the way of detailed research. Although the fraudulent nature of this election complicates any systematic correlation of online-campaigning with voting patterns, this election provides a perfect case study to explore a range of hitherto unelaborated theoretical issues concerning the political Internet in Russia.

As such, the aim of this article is to addresses this shortfall and to answer three related questions. First, and irrespective of the rapid growth in Internet use, to what extent did parties and candidates actually develop an online presence during the election campaign period? Second, did the Internet serve to equalise the competitive playing field for opposition parties, vis-à-vis the electorally dominant United Russia? And third, was there evidence that candidates were really using the full range of interactive features offered by Web 2.0 to engage directly with potential voters, in particular through the popular *LiveJournal* (*Zhivoizhurnal*) blog and *Twitter* micro-blog social media?

Overall, these three questions allow for a general audit of party web-presence – who was online, when and where – but in view of the limited number of dedicated studies on Russian parties, elections and RuNet (March 2004; Oates 2010, 2014; Semetko & Krasnoboka 2003), these questions also give an indication of the growing role of this medium and its potential to change political behaviour. This focus also allows for an exploration of a range of theoretical issues, such as the role of biographical, party-based and institutional factors affecting candidate web presence and web absence that have so far received little analysis in the Russian context.

The focus is on the seven parties (A Just Russia; The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF); The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR); Patriots of Russia; Right Cause; United Russia; and Yabloko) and their candidates that successfully registered with the Central Election Commission (CEC) prior to the election and which competed for the 450 mandates in the State Duma

during the official 'intensive campaign' period (November 6 – December 3 2011). Although primarily concerned with supply-side issues – the way parties utilised the Internet for their campaigns – this article also considers demand-side issues, including engagement with party and candidate social media by Internet users.

The first part of this article provides essential background, including a discussion of the factors limiting or encouraging online campaigning for this election. Part two then examines the scope of internet use during the campaign, presenting analysis of 910 candidates competing on party lists in 20 regions across the Russian Federation. Part three provides detailed analysis of candidate use of *LiveJournal* and *Twitter* social networks. The conclusion and substantive argument forwarded in this article is that even though United Russia and its candidates enjoyed a clear superiority in web-presence over its competitors, there was none the less evidence of equalisation, as the online message of the remaining party candidates converged on an anti-United Russia theme. However, while providing a rare platform for opposition to launch, at times, vitriolic attacks against United Russia and the authorities, there was little evidence that candidates were using social networking sites to directly interact with and mobilise the electorate. At the same time, the overall weak engagement by candidates with social media during the campaign period was matched by an equally weak engagement with partisan sites by Internet users. Taken together, this questions the overall impact of the online campaign and raises questions as to the real potential of the Internet to affect political change in Russia.

What to expect online? Mixed messages leading into the campaign

Although there is documented use of the internet by Russian parties as far back as the 1999 State Duma election (Semetko & Krasnoboka 2003), the fact that user numbers have lagged behind European and North American levels means that research on political parties and the Internet remains largely confined to the latter, although with increasing exceptions from other parts of the world, in particular from Asia (see Kluver *et al*. 2007; Tkach-Kawasaki; Wang 2010, etc.). In the Russian case, the 2011 State Duma election stakes a claim as the county's first 'internet election' based on an anticipated synergy between increasing numbers of Internet users and increasing party web presence in its various forms. However, the Russian case is more problematic than those North American and European electoral democracies that have thus far received the bulk of analysis, and so a consideration of some of the competing hypotheses is warranted.

Incentives: reasons to go online in search of votes

There is little doubt that Russia is currently experiencing an expediential growth in Internet use. In the period between the 2007 and 2011 State Duma elections, the number of Internet users in Russia grew by 73 per cent.[1] Although Internet population penetration stood at a modest 43 per cent in 2011 (in comparison with 78.3 per cent for the USA or 85.2 per cent for Finland in the same time frame), Russia had 48.3 million internet users coming into the December 2011 State Duma election, placing it second only to Germany in the European region.[2]

Although there is no automatic translation between increasing Internet use among the general public and increasing online presence among political actors, this trend none the less provides a practical incentive for Russian parties, like parties elsewhere, to establish channels of communication with supporters and potential voters. In fact, the so-called 'bandwagon' hypothesis (Gibson *et al*. 2003, p 51; Jackson 2006, p. 293) suggests that parties, regardless of the electoral and political system in which they operate, are keen to emulate the online experience of parties elsewhere. From this perspective, the past successes of American, but also European parties in utilising the Internet to mobilise voters would not have gone unnoticed by their Russian counterparts, and so the bandwagon hypothesis predicts significant party engagement with the internet during the 2011 State Duma campaign based purely the anticipated synergy between the large numbers of Russian voters with internet access and political parties seeking votes.

Coming into the December election, there was evidence that political actors in Russia were well aware of the mobilisation potential of the internet. Elements of the so-called 'anti-system opposition' had been more or less active online from the outset –'celebrity' political activist, Aleksei Navalny, for example, was blogging on *LiveJournal* from 2006 – although mainstream parties and their leaders were a little slower to realise the unique opportunity offered by online social media. However, as early as 2010, there were signs that mainstream parties were proliferating online and engaging with numerous social networking options (Litoi 2010). In an abstract sense, it was noted that circa 2011, there were two emerging 'mass parties' in Russia: the more established 'TV party' and the rapidly

[1] Available: www.internetworldstats.com, accessed 2 September 2011.
[2] Available: www.internetworldstats.com, accessed 2 September 2011.

developing 'internet party'.[3] While the TV and mainstream media were dominated by the authorities and strongly favoured Prime Minister Putin, President Medvedev and United Russia, the Internet was considered a medium that united opposition forces and those with diametrically opposing views of the authorities.

This is not to say that authorities were ignoring the potential of the Internet (Renz & Sullivan 2013). Much fanfare was made of President Medvedev's mastery of communicative technologies (Moan-Larsen 2014), evident by the fact that his *LiveJournal* account (opened in April 2009) and *Twitter* account (June 2010) won the RuNet 'best blogger' award in February 2011. United Russia, as the party closest to power, enjoyed an impressive web-presence, not least through the numerous websites supporting the president and prime minister. The months leading up to the December 2011 election also saw a number of high-profile DDOS attacks on Russian websites, including *LiveJournal*, which indicated that the security services were 'testing their weapons' in anticipation of increased online activity during the campaign period.

Despite these periodical attacks on opposition websites, a second incentive for Russian parties to campaign online – aside from following potential voters – was the relative freedom of access to this medium. From the perspective of smaller parties competing in the December election, which in view of United Russia's decade-long dominance may be taken to mean the remaining six, the Internet offered a relatively easy way to gain information parity in a political system where traditional print and TV media remain largely state controlled (Oates 2007). As noted, smaller parties with limited access to traditional media outlets may see the wide-reach of the internet and its lack of external editing as an ideal way to communicate with voters (Gibson & Ward 2000, p. 302). The so-called 'equalisation' hypothesis (Morris 2000; Norris 2003, p. 43), for example, identifies the internet as a potential leveller, allowing smaller parties to gain competitive parity with larger parties owing to the relative cost efficiency of the internet compared to traditional media (Krueger 2006, p. 760). From this perspective, the equalisation hypothesis not only predicts significant party engagement with the Internet during the 2011 election campaign, but also evidence of a virtual levelling among smaller and larger parties in terms of the scale and quality of their campaigns.

The equalisation hypothesis ties into a third set of incentives which focus squarely on the parties themselves. According to Gibson and Ward, the internet offers opportunities for just about

[3] Gazeta editorial (2010) *Internet protiv Zomboyasshchika*, available: http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2010/12/21_e_3473009.shtml#, accessed 09 May 2014.

every party organisation to realise their goals (2000, p. 304)**.** For the classic 'vote' and 'office seeking' parties (see Harmel & Janda 1994), the Internet provides opportunities to target and mobilise specific groups in society, including younger voters (Trammell 2007; Wang 2010, p. 231). For those parties with policy or democracy promoting goals, web 2.0 and the opportunity to engage in real-time exchanges with voters also makes this medium particularly attractive. In short, what may be termed the 'interactivity' hypothesis suggests that all-kinds of parties, regardless of their goals, have little to lose from going online in search of voters and utilising the unique opportunity to interact with them as and when possible. This not only ties into the 'master theory' of the Internet which sees democracy enhanced or renewed by creating more substantial modes of mass-elite linkage (see Breindl 2010), but also with the idea that parties and candidates will want to exploit the Internet and its interactive potential if only to show that they are listening and that they are 'in touch' with common people (Coleman 2005, p. 273).

Counter-incentives: the Russian context

While party goals are considered essential for determining the way parties use new information communication technologies (Römmele 2003, p. 8), theories of party goals and general incentives for intensive online party campaigns are by no means unproblematic in the Russian context. There is a substantial body of literature that documents the sub-competitive nature of elections in Russia's 'electoral authoritarian' system, including the December 2011 State Duma election (White 2011) and this in many ways complicates the notion of party goals and online competition. For example, there has long been talk of fake or co-opted opposition parties which exist as components of power rather than alternatives to power (Remington 2003). This in itself raises a legitimate question as to how hard opposition parties and their candidates really compete during election campaigns, when the most vociferous and problematic opposition parties are usually excluded – as the case for the December 2011 election when Boris Nemtsov's opposition Party of Popular Freedom (PARNAS) failed to gain registration with the CEC.

More importantly, any discussion of the Internet as an ideal medium to further party goals needs to bear in mind the fact that the goals of Russian parties are by no means clear. So far, Russia has persisted with a 'professional government' that is not formed by the winners of parliamentary elections, but by the Prime Minister nominated by the President, meaning that even the dominant United Russia

has had little success in translating previous parliamentary majorities into government control (Roberts 2012a). If election winners do not form government and if opposition parties are not seriously promoting alternatives to the prevailing regime, then in theoretical terms at least, these parties resist the usual means-end goals analysis typical for vote and office seeking parties. In other words, does the internet offer any real advantage to parties in a system where opposition parties never win and where the winner never gains power?

Even if we acknowledge that Russian party goals are likely to be slightly different from those traditionally theorised, there are reasons to suspect that the attractiveness of online campaigning for political parties in general has been exaggerated. This is seen clearly in the counter argument to the equalisation hypothesis, where studies have shown that smaller parties lack the expertise and resources to challenge larger parties in the virtual world (Small 2008) and where the Internet merely serves to reproduce real-world inequalities.

In the Russian case, there is a clear 'real world' inequality aspect to take into account when considering the December online campaign. Not only was United Russia the electorally dominant party coming into this election, with previous majorities gained in the 2003 and 2007 State Duma elections, but it also had unrivalled resources at its disposal. According to CEC figures published in March 2012 for the preceding financial year (CEC 2012a), United Russia's 'official' income of around four billion roubles (3,957,811,607) dwarfed its competitors and was slightly less than the combined income of the remaining six parties (Right Cause 993 million roubles, A Just Russia 955 million roubles; the CPRF 834 million roubles; LDPR 717 million roubles; Yabloko 422 million roubles; and Patriots of Russia 77 million roubles).

At the same time, studies suggest that, regardless of the unquestioned interactive potential of the internet, parties may be reluctant to engage in too much online debate, discussion and collaboration with Internet users (Lilleker *et al*. 2010; Trammell *et al*. 2006, p. 23), questioning the interactivity hypothesis. After all, parties are, by and large, top-down organisations that tightly control information flows, more interested in selling a political product to voters than co-creating one. Some studies have also questioned the motivation of individual candidates to seriously engage with the internet, suggesting that many simply supply themselves with a 'cosmetic' internet presence in order to create a virtual (and somewhat meaningless) confirmation that they are forward-thinking politicians in tune with the latest technological developments (Gibson & Ward 2000, p. 302).

Although notions of 'bandwagoning' suggest that candidates will attempt to imitate the perceived online success of their US and European counterparts, candidates in Russian elections are operating in a different political and cultural context that may mitigate the role of the Internet in campaigning. The Russian party-list, proportional representation voting-system in place at the time of the 2011 State Duma election represents a significant context specific institutional factor mitigating against online campaigning, as it creates thousands of candidates with little prospect of gaining a Duma seat, and so little incentive to develop an online presence. Studies conducted on Norwegian parliamentary elections, for example, show how candidates' positions on party lists affect online-behaviour and campaigning style (Karlsen & Skogerbo 2013). There are also considerations of Russia's unique electoral geography to take into account, such as the uneven distribution of voters in each region and varying levels of internet penetration – factors which have received no empirical analysis to date, but which could affect levels of online campaigning.

There are also biographical considerations to take into account, not least the role of gender – an important point in a male dominated political environment such as Russia's, although some studies suggest that male politicians are actually more publicity-seeking than women (Aalberg & Strömbäck 2011). There are also generational influences. For example, while young people increasingly report using the Internet on a regulate basis (Trammell 2007, p. 1255), there is some suggestion that the older generation are more 'technology averse' and less likely to use the Internet and all its interactive features effectively (Norton 2007; Oates 2010). This is by no means irrelevant when considering some of the generational characteristics of Russian parliamentary politics.

In the Fifth Duma Convocation (2008-11) on the eve of the election, the youngest deputy was a youthful 24, but the oldest a far from sprightly 75 years of age. Despite efforts to create greater circulation within United Russia and to attract younger candidates, the average age of the party's faction in the Fifth Duma Convocation (2007-11) was 53, just a little way behind the CPRF faction (58). In addition, the leaders of the three main opposition parliamentary parties heading into the December election (A Just Russia, LDPR and CPRF) had a combined age of 189 (Mironov, born 1953, Zhirinovskii 1946 and Zyuganov 1944). While not a convincing reason to expect less online engagement, generational factors raise awareness to the potential importance of a range of as-of-yet unforeseen factors relating to the Russian political system that may influence the way parties and candidates use the Internet.

To what extent did competing parties develop an online presence?

The seven parties that successfully registered with the CEC included the electorally-dominant and self-proclaimed 'centrist' United Russia, which won a constitutional majority of 315 out of 450 seats in the previous December 2007 election. Along with United Russia, there were three other 'parliamentary parties' or parties with parliamentary representation, including the socialist-leaning A Just Russia, its left-wing competitor, the CPRF and the nationalist LDPR. The remaining three parties hoping to pass the seven per cent threshold included the nationalist Patriots of Russia and two liberal-leaning parties in the form of Right Cause and Yabloko. No characterisation of the post-Yeltsin party-system is without its problems, in particular the applicability of left/right ideological distinctions, but a frequently blogged complaint from all party candidates during the election campaign was the lack of distinction between party messages.

Party web-presence

Although the official start of party mobilisation was signalled by President Medvedev's election announcement on August 30, 2011, the main focus of this study was on party candidate activity during the 28 day 'intensive campaign period' that began on November 6, 2011. According to electoral law, all registered parties received free airtime and press coverage to promote their platforms in the period November 6 – December 4 2011, with the final 24 hours designated as the 'quiet period', in which party agitation in the mainstream media was prohibited.

However, prior to this main focus, an initial exploration of party web-presence was conducted in September 2011, with the aim of confirming that each party had at least a foothold in the virtual world. In terms of party web-presence, it was unsurprising that each of the seven parties maintained one central website, with regional branches of A Just Russia, the CPRF, the LDPR, United Russia and Yabloko operating secondary sites. With the exceptions of Patriots of Russia and Right Cause, these main party sites were updated regularly and were well-linked to other partisan websites, including leader websites and party pages on a host of social networks. The main social networks included *Facebook*; the Russian variant *Vkontakte*; *Odnoklassniki* (similar to the English language *Friends Reunited*); *Blog Mail*; *YouTube*; and the *LiveJournal* and *Twitter* sites analysed in more detail in the next section.

The existence of party websites in Russia is not new and, as mentioned, their appearance was noted as early as the 1999 State Duma election. Although there are well-established techniques for analysing the content and function of websites (Gibson & Ward 2000), by 2011, this aspect of the online campaign was a somewhat outdated mode of communication in the face of proliferating of social networks. However, what the initial analysis of party websites did elucidate, even as early as September 2011, is the general pattern of party interaction with the Internet to be repeated throughout the campaign period. The poorly maintained websites of Patriots of Russia and Right Cause was a predictor of their weak engagement with other social networks, while the impressive websites of United Russia and A Just Russia foretold an extensive web presence on just about every mainstream Russian language site available.

It also became obvious that United Russia and, to a lesser extent, A Just Russia were translating their relative offline resource advantage into an online advantage. For example, United Russia's *Twitter* account (er_2011) pumped out an average of over 360 tweets per day during the intensive campaign period – more in a single day than the LDPR and Yabloko managed in the whole of the campaign, literally swamping the tweets from other parties. By December 2011, United Russia's YouTube channel had an archive of over 600 video clips, compared to 351 for A Just Russia and 87 for LDPR. United Russia typically dominated on most quantitative indicators and, although no guarantee of effective Internet campaigning, it certainly indicated an advantage for United Russia

Candidates online

Although the initial audit revealed the existence of well-maintained party websites and social networking accounts, in reality, quantifying the overall web-presence of the parties was impossible due to the sheer scale of their online engagement, as well as the problem of verifying if an account was officially sanctioned by the party (United Russia and its 'support websites' is a case in point). However, candidate web-presence was a different proposition and, in many ways, revealed the true extent of online campaigning. After all, voters were not only choosing between competing parties, but between thousands of candidates running on party lists across 83 subjects of the Federation.

To address the issue of candidate web-presence, party lists were selected in 20 regions. In total, these 20 regions yielded 140 separate party lists and 910 candidates, with their web-presence ascertained by individually entering their name and details into the Russian language *Yandex* search

engine. This was repeated a total of three times for each candidate, first to search for the existence of individual websites, second for candidate *Twitter* accounts and third for *LiveJournal* accounts – the basis of the analysis provided below.

Owing to the large number of candidates and the numerous social networks accessible to them, a decision was made to limit analysis to *Twitter* and *LiveJournal*. Both sites were popular coming into the December election and both have very distinct qualities for the purposes of party campaigning, as discussed in more detail in the next section. With all but a handful of cases, the identity of the candidates was corroborated with the help of the biographical information supplied by the CEC on each individual registered to run in the election. This is by no means unimportant, as 'identity' issues represent perhaps the greatest problem related to online research and there were plenty of examples of 'black PR' and online identity theft during this campaign.

In terms of candidate age and internet presence, throughout the twenty regions, the average age of Tweeters (39.8) and *LiveJournal* bloggers (42) was slightly lower than the overall average age of the 910 candidates analysed (46.8). But overall, age was not found to have a significant association with candidate web presence (Table 1). The same was true for gender (Table 2), echoing a study of the 2003 Finnish parliamentary election, where gender was also found to be an insignificant predictor (Carlson 2008). In fact, as only 13 per cent of male candidates and 8.2 per cent of female candidates were found to possess personal websites and/ or *Twitter* and *LiveJournal* accounts (a total of 111 out of 910 candidates), there are immediate grounds to reject the bandwagon hypothesis that the rapid growth of internet use in Russia in the period 2008-11 elicited significant online campaigning by candidates.

Table 1: Age and Web Presence (*N* = 910)

Table 2: Gender and Web Presence (*N* = 910)

In the absence of significant association between either age or gender and web presence, what other factors can account for the failure of significant numbers of candidates to maintain websites, *Twitter* accounts and *LiveJournal* blogs during the 2011 election campaign? As mentioned in the previous section, the bandwagon hypothesis is a generalised prediction that both candidates and parties will follow voters into the virtual world based on past successes in the US and EU, where growing internet

use has been successfully utilised by vote-seeking actors. However, the Russian context has enough uniqueness, both in cultural and institutional terms to question the utility of borrowing campaign strategies from elsewhere. While cultural differences are difficult to operationalise and deserve separate analysis, the cross-regional aspect of this study provides an opportunity to test some assumptions about the role of electoral geography (the relative size of the electorate in each region), internet penetration (the varying number of internet users in each region) and the role of the closed-list PR voting system (candidates' positions on the party lists) as factors potentially affecting the probability that a candidate would have a web presence during the 2011 State Duma election campaign. Table 3 presents the results of a logistic regression on the binary outcome of web presence/absence.[4]

Table 3: Logistic Regression Model of Web Presence

As shown in the results of the logistic regression, candidates' position on the party list, the number of registered voters in a region and party affiliation had statistical significance in increasing the probability that a candidate would have a web presence. Candidates occupying the top three places on a regional party list had around 47 per cent greater odds of having a web presence than candidates occupying positions 8 or lower (the reference category). This gives some support to the notion that so-called 'locomotives' or candidates with high name recognition, who are typically placed at the top of party lists to attract voters (Samuels 2002: 468), are likely to possess greater web presence relative to candidates lower down the list. Elsewhere, large regions with 4,000,000 or more voters increased the odds of candidate web-presence by around 26 per cent compared to the reference category of regions with an electorate of less than 1,000,000. What this suggests is that a range of country specific institutional factors associated with the electoral and wider political system are likely to affect the potential of the Internet, above and beyond the level of internet penetration in any particular setting – a subject in need of more research.

More importantly, at least from the perspective the equalisation hypothesis, there was a clear quantitative advantage for United Russia, in terms of the number of candidates with a web presence. As the breakdown in Table 4 shows, United Russia (43.7%), but also A Just Russia (27.8%), appeared to

[4] Data on the number of eligible voters in each of the 20 regions was obtained from the IRENA electoral data-base (http://www.geliks.org/index.php), while data on regional internet use was obtained from RIA-Analitkia (2011).

have the edge in terms of the number of candidates with websites, *Twitter* accounts and *Livejournal* blogs.

Table 4: Party and Web Presence (*N* = 910)

Overall, the extent of party and candidate presence during the December 2011 campaign lends weight to existing studies which suggest that larger parties are more likely to carry over their real world dominance into the virtual world. Both Small (2008) and Strandberg (2009) found that there was a pronounced difference in Internet use between minor and major parties, with the larger parties showing a clear online advantage. One practical explanation is that even though the Internet represents a cheaper alternative to running TV, radio or printed campaigns, costs are nonetheless involved, especially in relation to the potential advantages of the Internet (Benoit & Benoit 2005). In particular, the unique 'interactivity' offered by online campaigning is not cost-free and requires extra manpower to maintain forums and discussion boards on social networks. There is also a suggestion that parties are becoming more professional with their online campaigning, and so rising costs are inevitable (Gibson & Römmele 2009).

For this reason, it is unsurprising that the parties with the most extensive online campaigns (United Russia and A Just Russia) and the party with the weakest online campaign (Patriots of Russia) had very different real world circumstances. Both United Russia and A Just Russia were well funded organisations coming into this election, as indicated by the previous discussion of party accounts. But both parties also had close connections with government, the Presidential Administration and the regime in general, and had claim to the 'party of power' label (Roberts 2012b), even if this was more ambiguous for A Just Russia, especially after party leader Sergei Mironov was ousted from his influential Federation Council speaker post in April 2011.

In fact, in the Russian context, the idea of a relationship between web presence and resources appears to find support from earlier studies. Semetko & Krasnoboka, for example, examined incipient internet use at the time of the 1999 State Duma election and found that, of all the types of parties online, it was the resource rich 'parties of power' that were more likely to have websites (Semetko & Krasnoboka 2003, p. 85). By 2011, the party of power and its candidates was more likely to win on

most quantitative indicators of web-presence, although 'how' and 'if' this advantage was translated into effective use is a little more difficult to answer – the subject of the next section.

How were candidates using social media? Evidence from *Twitter* and *LiveJournal*

The choice of *Twitter* and *LiveJournal* for detailed analysis is relevant for a number of reasons. At the time of the December 2011 election, *Twitter* was a relatively new social network in Russia, but one enjoying rapid growth, ranked the seventeenth most popular RuNet site at the start of the intensive campaign period.[5] *Twitter* essentially functions as a personalised means of telling the virtual world what you are doing (Honeycutt & Herring 2009: 1), but its actual value as a campaign tool is restricted by its limited format. Although impossible to outline party pledges or other details of the party platform, *Twitter*'s ability to create a relatively large following in a short period of time, as well as the overall ease and speed of its use make it ideal for mobilising voters to attend party events, and in the Russia case, demonstrations and street gatherings that were occurring regularly during the campaign period. The ability to directly reply to individual tweets and to insert hyperlinks and hashtags to connect to wider topics forms the basis of its 'interactive' potential.

In contrast to the *Twitter* micro-blog, the purpose of *LiveJournal*, as with blogs in general, is to declare your presence, 'to affirm that your thoughts are at least as worth hearing as anyone else's' (Coleman 2005: 274). *LiveJournal*, unlike *Twitter*, was a well-established social network ranked tenth on RuNet in 2011 and the most popular Russian blog site. Although popularised by former president Dmitry Medvedev, it originally garnered a reputation as a refuge for Russian intellectuals (Rutten 2009), but in terms of election campaigning, its longer format offers candidates an ideal medium to communicate their position, the party position and to comment on other candidates and parties. Its interactive component is based around the ability of readers to leave comments to specific journal entries, while the use of tags enables blog authors to link individual entries around themes.

Twitter and LiveJournal analysis

The results of the regional analysis highlighted a relatively small number of *Twitter* users, with only 45 accounts from the 910 candidates in the sample (see Table 5). In many ways, the low level of *Twitter* usage echoes research conducted on the European Parliament campaign of 2009, where only 36 out of

[5] Available: http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/RU, accessed 10 August 2012.

288 candidates were found to have adopted this social media (Verger, *et. al*. 2011, p. 496), largely due to the its relative novelty as a campaign tool. However, what this analysis found, to repeat the point made in the previous section, is that United Russia and A Just Russia dominated on quantitative indicators, with candidates affiliated to these parties enjoying a numerical edge in terms of Tweeting. The use of hashtags and hyperlinks suggested that candidates were not always aware of their interactive function, reflecting as much the novelty of this social network. A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test did not find any significant differences between party use of these interactive features, although the skewness of the data provides enough evidence to question the interactivity hypothesis that each candidate was making the most of hashtags and hyperlinks to interact directly with potential voters.

Table 5: Overview of *Twitter* usage among candidates

In order to better understand how candidates were using *Twitter*, a coding scheme was employed based on a previous study of US congressmen (Golbeck & Grimes 2010). This scheme involved placing tweets into one of seven categories including; direct communication, personal message, activities, information, requesting action, fund raising and unknown messages. The advantage of this coding scheme is that it gives a clear indication of the way candidates were using *Twitter* during the intensive campaign period, while the ability to aggregate data shows variations according to party. It should be noted that the applicability of a coding scheme derived from US politics was relatively unproblematic due to *Twitter*'s limited format, which gave users less room to innovate. A 10 per cent sample of tweets were analysed by a second coder, with inter-coder reliability using the Holsti formula established at 0.84.[6]

Table 6: *Twitter* analysis (% per category)

What the results of the analysis show is that candidates were largely using *Twitter* to communicate directly with other *Twitter* users (replying to tweets using the @ convention) and to provide information, which typically involved informing followers of candidate and party-leader

[6] No systematic differences were found between coders.

appearances in the mainstream media. More importantly, candidates were not using *Twitter* to directly mobilise supporters. Among all the opposition candidates, there were few 'requests for action' of any kind and no requests for supporters to attend party events, take to the streets or to take part in any political events. Requests for action, when they were made, focused exclusively on asking followers to send questions to the Tweeter and to send information concerning electoral fraud. A handful of tweets urged followers to vote for any party, except United Russia or as phrased by A Just Russia candidate, Andrei Karabedov, on December 1 2011: to '[vote] for any party, except the party of crooks and thieves'; using the offensive moniker popularised online by Aleksei Navalny. Conversely, the tiny number of United Russia tweets requesting action urged followers to vote in a more cautious way. As reminded by United Russia candidate, Andrei Isaev, two days before the election 'When voting remember your children. They will not forgive us if, instead of sustainable development there will be the endless abyss of revolutionary upheaval' (tweeted on December 2, 2011).

In comparative terms, the Russian candidate use of *Twitter* was similar to the study of US congressmen, where informational tweets accounted for just over half (54.7 per cent) of all tweets analysed (Golbeck & Grimes 2010, p. 1615). However, the candidates analysed in this study, as indicated by Table 6, were more likely to use *Twitter* to directly reply to other tweets and *Twitter* users. In many ways, this reinforces the nature of this medium at the time of the election as one confined to a relatively small band of political elites, more like a light-hearted online debating club than a medium for mass mobilisation.

LiveJournal, on the other hand, was a more established social network and there was a strong likelihood that it would reveal greater usage among candidates as well as evidence of equalisation. In terms of analysis, its less standardised format necessitated a broader approach and so in addition to recording interactivity through the use of tags and counts of reader comments, entries were also analysed through the lens of so-called 'functional theory of campaign discourse'. Functional theory of voting is based on a number of underlying assumptions, principally that campaign discourse is aimed at winning an election by convincing citizens to vote for a particular candidate or party. In essence, voting is considered to be a comparative act (Benoit *et al*. 2003, p. 2) and so the three options available for candidates to convince voters and positively distinguished themselves are to acclaim (engage in self-praise); to attack (criticise other candidates); and to defend (refute attacks made on them).

These categories were applied to a total of 322 individual *LiveJournal* entries, each one coded according to the function of the entry. Although many blogs had elements of all three functions, a sentence count was made to determine the overriding single function for each. Entries that had no obvious function or which made no political statement were left un-coded. As with Twitter, a sample (64 entries – 20 per cent) were analysed by a second coder and the resulting inter-coder reliability was established at 0.96.

As noted, the purpose of applying a functional theory of campaigning was to provide an extra level of analysis for the *LiveJournal* blogs, although the applicability of this theory is by no means uncomplicated. This theory was developed from a specific political and cultural context, namely US elections, (also applied to the presidential debates in the Ukrainian presidential election in 2004 – Benoit & Klyukovski 2006) and although, 'acclaiming', 'attacking' and 'defending' are sufficiently broad categories to capture the general gist of blog content, there is still the problem of context. As mentioned, winning in Russian parliamentary elections is complicated by the absence of party government, so there are no guarantees that the Russian online campaign will be quite as 'functional' as the American equivalents. However, one may surmise that individual candidates were either campaigning for a seat in parliament or to boost the overall status of the regional branch of the party. The results of this analysis are presented below.

Table 7: Overview of *LiveJournal* (Nov. 6 - Dec. 4)

In comparative terms, the number of attacks was surprisingly high. A study of the 2004 American presidential campaign which analysed the blogs of the challenger John Kerry and incumbent President George W. Bush, using functional theory (Trammell 2006, p. 403) found that 49.7 per cent of all blog entries analysed contained an attack, with challengers more likely to engage in 'attack blogging' than incumbents (70.6 per cent of attacks coming from the Kerry campaign). This study found that 44 per cent of all *LiveJournal* entries had a clear attack function (141 out of 320 individual entries) with 98.5 per cent coming from the six 'opposition' parties.

Who were the opposition candidates attacking? A total of 55 out of the 139 opposition *LiveJournal* entries with an identified attack function, directly attacked United Russia. The nature of these attacks varied, ranging from general allegations of underhand campaigning, the use of celebrities

to bolster ratings, the party's welfare policy, etc. but also specific rebukes, such as the party's role in unseemly building work in St. Petersburg. Perhaps more striking was the number of attacks on the 'authorities' (67), broadly defined, that by association constituted an attack on United Russia too. Attacks on police abuses, biased election commissions, government, bureaucracy, TV censorship, corrupt university officials, abuse of administrative resources, corrupt regional administrations, among others, led the reader to and easy and intended association with United Russia.

A good example can be seen in the entry from 4 December, the day of the election, by Yabloko candidate Andrei Rudomakha. Rudomakha documents in detail a lottery that was conducted across Krasnodarskii Krai by representatives of United Russia's youth organisation, *Molodaya Gvardiya*, in close proximity to polling stations and offering substantial prizes to participants (including apartments and cars). Tickets for the lottery were given free to young men and women between the ages of 18 and 35, if they could show the souvenir calendar given to every voter (by coincidence, also between the ages of 18 and 35) in the polling stations. The focus of the attack is neither United Russia nor their youth organisation, but on the Krasnodar authorities (the regional administration) and the CEC for allowing the lottery to take place when it clearly breaks electoral law that specifically forbids the use of any lottery connected with voting during campaign periods. However, the association with United Russia is clear, as the direct beneficiary of this alleged 'voter bribery' is plain to see.

Elsewhere, the hazy boundary between United Russia and the state apparatus provided opposition bloggers with an almost limitless scope to discuss issues affecting voters and to attack the party at the same time. Sverdlovskya Oblast' Yabloko candidate, Vladimir Pshenichnikov, for example, devoted the bulk of his 14 campaign entries to corruption and local housing issues – a particular source of dissatisfaction among voters. Likewise, CPRF candidate, Oleg Smolin (Moscow City) detailed cases of serious electoral fraud in several regions in his *LiveJournal* blog, with the attack focused squarely on regional administrations and the CEC. However, in nearly every case, an explicit link to United Russia was by no means necessary. Although reference to the popular 'party of the crooks and thieves' was a common substitute on many opposition blogs, the fact that United Russia itself publicises its connections with regional administrations and governors, together with the fact that it monopolises regional and municipal politics in most regions, created an inescapable association.

Overall, there was a great deal of variety in the way candidates used their *LiveJournal* accounts during the campaign period, echoing previous research on candidate blogging from the 2005 Danish parliamentary election which found variation in both the frequency of blog posts and the style of writing (Klastrup & Pederson 2006, p. 6). However, it was clear that candidates in the December election shared at least one commonality in their blogging – a willingness to attack United Russia. While it is not possible to draw meaningful conclusions as to the effectiveness of attack blogs, or why they were so common during this election, the nature of the Internet may provide some explanation. Trammell (2006, p. 404) suggests that attack blogs are effective because they can link-in additional source material that allows readers to check the facts for themselves, and which add to their authenticity, making online attacks more likely to be well-received than in other media forms.

The party message: but is anyone listening?

So far, the exploration of the online campaign reveals a somewhat contradictory picture. Although there was little evidence that candidates were bandwagoning and following voters online, and even less evidence they were using all the interactive features available, there is at least some support for the equalisation hypothesis. On the one hand, United Russia successfully translated its resource advantage to the virtual world, dominating on quantitative measures, but in terms of qualitative use, there were signs that the remaining parties were managing some kind of online synergy, compensating for their relative disadvantage by focusing their efforts to a concerted attack on United Russia. However, while the notion of equalisation is impossible to ascertain with any certainty, there are a number of anomalies that, when taken together, provide important additional considerations for the online campaign.

Anomalies: how much equalisation?

The first anomaly was that the discovery of candidate *LiveJournal* or *Twitter* accounts did not necessarily mean that they were actually maintained during the campaign period. While this is a common sense deduction; that not all candidates would have either the time or the inclination to maintain them, the extent of dormant accounts, especially for United Russia, suggests that there were some reservations, even an unwillingness among candidates to engage with social networking media. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the easier *Twitter* format revealed only a handful of dormant accounts, but almost two-thirds of *LiveJournal* blogs were unused during the intensive campaign period, with

United Russia and A Just Russia candidates – the two overall leaders in web-presence – accounting for most of them.

Figure 1: Dormant *Twitter* accounts in the campaign period (Nov. 6 – Dec. 4)

Figure 2: Dormant *LiveJournal* accounts in the campaign period (Nov. 6 – Dec. 4)

For United Russia, more than any other party, there were several reasons why candidates may have looked somewhat sceptically at their own engagement with online campaigning. The party was losing popularity, both as a longer-term trend between 2008 and 2011 (evident by the results of regional elections), but also as a short-term trend following the announcement in September 2011 that Prime Minster Putin and President Medvedev intended to 'castle' and swap their formal positions – apparently irrespective of the outcome of the parliamentary and presidential elections. This was a largely uninspiring message to voters and one that marginalised their role in the election process, and the fact that the announcement was made at United Russia's pre-election conference likely affected the calculations of some voters. United Russia candidates may have simply felt that no amount of online campaigning could have altered the situation.

There was also some suggestion that United Russia candidates were being forced to use social networks by the party leadership making them at best reluctant web-users, at worst 'dissenters' by deliberately failing to maintain their accounts. Material that appeared on *LiveJournal* in March 2011 provided a list of 296 State Duma deputies from the United Russia faction along with their *Vkontakte* ID numbers, claiming that these accounts were opened en masse with deputies instructed to use them (Avmalgin 2011). There were also several reports of online agencies in Russia offering blog services for cash, even before the 2011 election (Siderenko 2010), with the suggestion that some wealthier United Russia candidates were not the authors of their own Tweets or blogs. Of course, a word of caution must be made against these claims. There were plenty of examples of black PR directed against United Russia during the 2011 campaign, including a fake United Russia *Twitter* account (edinoros_online) that made 369 tweets on the day of the election alone.

Another important anomaly to take into account is the interaction of the audience, or those potential voters candidates were trying to mobilise. In this case, interaction does not relate to candidate

use of hashtags, hyperlinks, tags, etc., but in the low levels of active, as opposed to passive, engagement on the part of the online audience. Although this aspect of active and passive engagement was less apparent with *Twitter* in its more limited format, with *LiveJournal* it was clearly evident in the number of comments and responses left to individual entries. As shown in Table 8, the number of comments posted was generally low, lending support to the idea that the audience for party political sites tends to be either sympathisers or those sharing similar interests (Norris 2003, p. 24), but by no means a broad spectrum of Internet users.

Table 8: *Twitter* and *LiveJournal* Audience

In fact, analysis of party channels on YouTube during the campaign period show a similar trend of respectable viewing figures or quantitative indicators of passive engagement, but little evidence of active engagement. By December 4, 2011, the day of the election, United Russia's top fifty video clips on its YouTube channel had been viewed no less than 231,082 times (cumulative views). For LDPR's top fifty YouTube clips this cumulative viewing figure was 32,419 and for A Just Russia, 16,111 views. However, the number of cumulative comments left – 877 for United Russia, 62 for LDPR and 18 for A Just Russia – suggested a passive or weak audience engagement. The exception was the CPRF, whose YouTube channel's top fifty clips attracted 4,347,954 views and 10,256 comments up to December 4, 2011.

One explanation for the low number of comments, especially those posted to candidate *LiveJournal* entries, was the content of the blogs. As shown in Table 8, a large proportion of all individual entries can be described as 're-posts', or entries that were cut and pasted from other blogs, links to YouTube clips, or replicated articles from online news providers. The idea of blogs containing little original information fits with existing research. Wallsten (2007, p. 568), for example, notes that political bloggers tend to do little original reporting, relying primarily on established media outlets for their information. However, what this study found is that many candidates not only borrowed news stories from other Internet sites, but actually added very little in terms of their own commentary or analysis, simply reproducing material from another site. In most cases, these entries did not really constitute as a genuine 'blog entry' because there was so little, if any, authorship.

As noted elsewhere, unlike TV commercials which are usually viewed several times by the public, Internet sites tend to be visited only once and for this reason candidates need to give Internet

users a good reason to return to their site (Benoit & Benoit 2005, p. 234). Without sufficiently interesting content, an individual *LiveJournal* account is simply lost in cyberspace, becoming as ponderous and mundane as a real-world diary, but in this case, without the originality. In many ways this point – of low levels of engagement with the political Internet – finds support in opinion poll data collated just after the 2011 State Duma election. Despite the millions of Russian using the Internet on a regular basis, of a sample of 1600 respondents, 87 per cent confirmed that they never used the Internet to find information on current political issues (Rose 2012, p. 35).

Conclusions

Russian elections have typically been viewed as sub-competitive or 'free', but by no means 'fair' for much of the post-Soviet period, in particular in the post-Yeltsin period. The competitive playing field is often skewed in favour of the ruling party, in no small part due to the fact that existing laws ensuring equal media access are rarely enforced. At the same time, the close overlap between the state and United Russia means that many party candidates have regular media exposure in their official, non-party capacity, which is naturally difficult for voters (or election commissions) to distinguish. In some ways, the Internet is helping to overcome these problems, but the sheer expanse of the virtual world means that only very effective opposition strategies will attract significant numbers of uncommitted voters. In fact, the plight of opposition parties on the Internet can be much worse than in the real world, where a weak and poorly conceived Internet presence can create a virtual ghetto inhabited by a relatively small number of party supporters.

What this article has shown is that the significant increase in Internet use in Russia in the period between the 2007 and 2011 State Duma elections did not result in a significant engagement with this medium by parties and candidates for the purposes of campaigning. Moreover, candidates were either unaware or uninterested in interacting with voters and the feeling seems to have been mutual.

There is a case to be made that the combination of a relatively unfettered RuNet at the time of the 2011 State Duma election, the inability of United Russia to effectively turn its quantitative advantage into a successful online campaign and the harmonisation of the remaining six parties on an anti-United Russia message in some ways 'equalised' the competitive playing field for the December 2011 election. However, the fact that there was no evidence that candidates from the registered parties were using *Twitter* to mobilise supporters, and in view of the low levels of audience interaction with

LiveJournal, there are reasons to question the overall effectiveness and importance of the online campaign. Changes to Russian party law in 2012 and electoral law in 2014 will provide further incentives for parties and candidates to campaign online for the next State Duma election in 2016 – in particular the move away from 100 per cent party list voting. As indicated in this research, these institutional changes will likely have an effect, at least on the scope of online campaigning. But, with tighter regulations for RuNet introduced following the protests in 2012, and weak voter engagement still the norm, the Internet may once again be rendered a peripheral factor in Russian elections.

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